Losing the People

Government Legitimacy Stumbles in Cambodia

By Phoak Kung

The ruling Cambodian People’s Party may have held on to power in national elections in 2013, but it registered a dramatic drop in the number of seats won. Prime Minister Hun Sen’s party relied on a campaign strategy that boasted of accomplishments long in the past and counted on fear mongering to lure voters. What the party failed to see is that Cambodians, especially the country’s legion of younger voters, have moved on to other issues such as social justice, democratic governance, corruption and the dream of making Cambodia a better place for all its citizens, writes Phoak Kung.

CAMBODIA’S POLITICAL landscape has been undergoing a dramatic transformation in recent years, and along with this have come changes in public perceptions of government legitimacy. Almost a year ago, huge crowds of protestors poured out onto the streets to demand that the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) step down in order to make way for what they call genuine democracy. The “change or no change, change” slogan of the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) has become the talk of Phnom Penh.

Although the CPP might not be under immediate threat given the fact that it still won 68 out of 123 seats in the July 2013 parliamentary election, its stunning decline is forcing the ruling elites to come to terms with the cruel reality that they aren’t as invincible or unbeatable as they once believed. While Cambodia is enjoying greater stability and peace, and the economy is growing rapidly, the CPP has fallen victim to its own achievements. The most pressing question is how did voters suddenly fall out of love with the CPP?

THE COLLAPSE OF THE KHMER ROUGE AND CAMBODIA IN THE 1980S

History can be useful in explaining this conundrum. In January 1979, the CPP, with Vietnamese military support, toppled the Khmer Rouge regime that murdered millions of its own people and destroyed every aspect of society. Shortly afterward, though, Cambodia became embroiled in another prolonged civil war between the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (the precursor of the CPP) and resistance movements including the Khmer Rouge, Khmer People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF), and the royalist party, the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Co-operative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC).

The country was also facing other overwhelming challenges such as famine in the early 1980s, international sanctions, crippled infrastructure, a severe shortage of educated people as a result of the Khmer Rouge genocide and widespread poverty. In short, it was a failed state. Despite such tremendous difficulties, Cambodia was slowly
recovering from the tragedy of the past, and most people were eager to get back to normal life after years of unspeakable suffering. Throughout the 1980s, the source of legitimacy for the CPP came from its victory over the Khmer Rouge and its ability to provide some degree of stability and peace. However, the presence of Vietnamese soldiers on Cambodian soil had gradually become a liability for the CPP.

**THE PARIS PEACE AGREEMENTS: A TURNING POINT?**

The signing of the Paris Peace Agreements on Oct. 23, 1991, marked an important turning point in Cambodian politics. The return of King Norodom Sihanouk after many years in exile brought great hope to his people that he would be able to transform Cambodia into a strong and prosperous country again, like the Sangkum Reastr Niyum (People’s Socialist Community) of the 1950s. There is no doubt that many people were still grateful to the CPP for saving their lives from the murderous Khmer Rouge, however, they were also desperate for a better future, and they strongly believed that King Sihanouk would be able to deliver it.

Moreover, the deployment of tens of thousands of peacekeepers by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1992 reassured people that the democratic transition would be smooth and peaceful. But what was even more crucial was that voters didn’t have to worry about another civil war breaking out if they voted for political parties other than the CPP, because they had UNTAC to safeguard peace and stability. The results of the 1993 election, which saw FUNCINPEC emerge victorious, clearly confirmed that view.

The CPP, however, vehemently rejected the election results, claiming massive irregularities. The brief threat of secession emerged among the provinces in the eastern part of the country, but never materialized. After several painful rounds of negotiations between the CPP and FUNCINPEC, a coalition government was finally created with Prince Norodom Ranariddh becoming the first Prime Minister and Hun Sen the second Prime Minister, with cabinet posts split equally between the two major parties. The secessionist incident and the subsequent power-sharing deal made many people realize that UNTAC didn’t have as much power as they once thought, and that the CPP remained the most powerful force in the country.

The CPP’s leaders quickly learned a bitter lesson from their stunning defeat in the 1993 election: that they had to go beyond the rhetoric of their revolutionary legacy and the mere existence of peace if they wanted to win the next election, scheduled for July 1998. More importantly, the CPP also had to compete with FUNCINPEC, which could bank on King Sihanouk’s tremendous popularity. Learning from the success of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum, the CPP’s leaders rolled out a range of popular policies and spent hundreds of millions of dollars on pet projects such as schools, health centers, pagodas, roads and bridges, many of which bore the name of second Prime Minister Hun Sen.

There was also a massive public campaign to refashion the image of the CPP and its leaders, and to promote their achievements to the public. Songs, films and narratives were used to tell the stories of the second prime minister’s humble background and his revolutionary struggles in an attempt to transform him into a charismatic leader like King Sihanouk. The strategy paid off. In just a few years, Hun Sen had become even more popular than his own party. It is also important to point out that the CPP’s leaders were keen to embrace some key reforms that subsequently led to economic growth and poverty reduction. Their strong economic performance helped them restore faith and confidence among voters.

Fear of civil war and instability took center stage again, however, when a deadly clash between the CPP and FUNCINPEC broke out in the heart of the nation’s capital July 5-6, 1997. The royalist armed forces were defeated and captured. Prince Ranariddh and his entourage fled the country even before the fighting began. The incident was a brutal reminder that peace remained fragile, and Cambodia could easily slide back into civil war. Furthermore, the Khmer Rouge was still fiercely fighting with the Phnom Penh government from their strongholds along the Cambodian-Thai border. Although its capacity had been greatly reduced since the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements in 1991, it was still a great concern for many Cambodians.

Under tremendous pressure from the international community, Prince Ranariddh was allowed to return to Cambodia in order to stand in the 1998 election. Not surprisingly, the issues of peace and stability were the main themes of the CPP’s campaign strategy. The ruling elites repeatedly reminded voters that they couldn’t guarantee peace if the opposition were elected. There was no doubt that many people still had fresh memories of the earlier deadly clash, so they took the CPP’s warning very seriously. Moreover, in the late 1990s, Cambodia’s economy was also taking off, finally lifting millions out of extreme poverty. The ability of the ruling elites to project themselves as a symbol of continuity, stability and peace, coupled with their strong economic record, propelled the CPP to victory in the 1998 election.
Thus, the public perception of what constitutes a good leader was also changing. In the past, Cambodians began to shift their focus away from vent war and instability, but now the public also views on what constitutes a legitimate government. People were still very careful not to do anything that might put their hard-won peace in danger. Yet, it was also clear that many Cambodians began to shift their focus away from peace and stability to other problems that might have a direct impact on their living conditions. Thus, the public perception of what constitutes a good leader was also changing. In the past, leaders were measured based on their ability to prevent war and instability, but now the public also looked at other qualities including the ability to create jobs, improve the plight of the poor and provide public goods and services.

In 2003, the CPP won the national election by a large margin, capturing 74 of 123 seats. The result also reflected the change in Cambodian views on what constitutes a legitimate government or a strong leader. While it is true to say that some voters supported the CPP because they were grateful for what it had done for them and the country in the past, other factors were also at play. Starting in the early 2000s, the national economy began growing at an astounding rate of around 10 percent annually, substantially improving the living conditions for millions of Cambodians. Farmers could now find markets for their products. A new generation of entrepreneurs sprung up in search of opportunities from the economic boom. The property sector was also growing at an unprecedented rate, giving rise to many satellite cities around the nation’s capital and other provinces. Land prices were also skyrocketing. Tall buildings, shopping malls and high-tech companies began to crowd the main streets of Phnom Penh. Furthermore, other human development indicators such as child mortality, life expectancy, education and health were also improving.

For most people, the country was surely on the right track to prosperity. Cambodia was nothing short of an economic miracle, given all the constraints it faced in past decades, and the CPP rightly deserved credit for these achievements. As a result, the CPP won an overwhelming victory in the 2008 election, winning 90 out of 123 seats. At this point, it seemed, the ruling elites of the CPP had become invincible and unbeatable.

POST-2008: WHAT WENT WRONG?

The rise of the CPP as a hegemonic party also sowed the seeds of its current problems. After crushing their opponents at the polls, the party’s leaders didn’t seem to feel the need to reform and modernize the party any faster, while demographic, socioeconomic and technological changes have greatly transformed Cambodian politics since the 2008 election.

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For many opposition supporters, the government has failed them big time. Despite sustained, rapid economic growth for over a decade, many poor people don’t feel the so-called trickle-down effects yet, and some even complain of being worse off as a result of economic modernization. It would be unfair to ignore the fact that the ruling elites have done a good job in improving the living conditions of millions of people and steadily reducing poverty. However, the government doesn’t seem to understand that the poor and vulnerable are usually the ones who also bear the brunt of economic reforms. For instance, the inequality gap remains staggering. Traditional businesses are making way for bigger private firms and multinational corporations. Wage rates and working conditions haven’t improved as much as people would wish. For many opposition supporters, the government has failed them big time.

The implications of the changes in public perception toward government legitimacy in Cambodia are deep and dramatic. Yet, the CPP can’t seem to grasp the full extent of these changes on domestic politics. Its election campaign strategies overly focused on its victory over the Khmer Rouge and the threat of war and social instability, which no longer seem to resonate with many voters. The lack of interest among the ruling elites in engaging youth in the decision-making process and the party’s development is perhaps the CPP’s
biggest misstep. The sheer number of young voters who turned up to welcome the return of Sam Rainsy, the CNRP’s president, when he came back to Cambodia from exile was astonishing. More importantly, they didn’t just vote for the CNRP, they were also fiercely active in mobilizing more support for the opposition.

While there is plenty of grand talk within the CPP about major governance reforms, the realities don’t seem to live up to expectations. The government usually sweeps the details under the rug. While Hun Sen surely recognizes the growing public discontent over the misconduct of politicians and civil servants, he repeatedly asked voters not to punish him and the CPP for mistakes he had nothing to do with. The CPP’s campaign slogan carried the same message, but in a subtle way: that if people still love and sympathize with Hun Sen, they should vote for the CPP. However, opposition supporters believe that the buck stops at the prime minister’s desk, and they are holding him accountable for mistakes. The CPP’s disappointing result in the 2013 election, with only 68 out of 123 seats, strongly suggests that voters agree.

CONCLUSION
It is time for Cambodia’s ruling elites to revise their election strategies if they want to reconnect with voters and get re-elected in the next general election. The rhetoric of war and instability is not enough to scare people into voting for the CPP; it might, instead, force them to take a more dangerous route to challenging the government, as the current political impasse and deadly clashes between authorities and protesters in recent months have clearly shown. Complicating matters further, the use of violence to crack down on peaceful protesters will only bring the country to the brink of chaos. That’s not what the CPP elites want to see either.

To be sure, the CPP can boast a strong economic record, but its leaders seem to have lost touch on these issues when they bitterly complain that the public doesn’t give them enough credit. They fail to realize that not everyone has received the benefits of double-digit economic growth, and some are even worse off. The government needs to do more to protect the poor, or at least to ease the pain of economic reforms by addressing some of the binding constraints facing the poor such as a skills shortage, low productivity, slow technological changes, widening inequality gap, lack of healthcare and so on.

A growing number of people in Cambodia are also concerned about non-economic issues, and really want to see genuine democracy take root. The problems of governance — rule of law, social justice, arbitrary use of power, human rights violations, corruption and nepotism, among others — will remain the top priority for many voters in the next election. Moreover, it will be an uphill battle for the CPP to offer good solutions that can put the racially and historically charged Vietnamese issues to rest. Although the CPP has been trying to convince voters that Cambodia hasn’t lost any territory to Vietnam, the result is rather disappointing. The best solution is perhaps to have public debates on these issues, so that people can judge them based on real evidence, not just political propaganda.

The changes in public perceptions toward government legitimacy in Cambodia are real and unprecedented. Cambodia’s politicians need to take steps to reform and modernize their parties now, if they want to survive electorally. The changes also underscore the diminishing role of the CPP’s revolutionary background as the sole factor in voters’ choices. There is little doubt that people will still look for a strong and capable leader to steer the country towards peace and prosperity. However, they also want a leader who will respect the rights of minorities, improve the plight of the poor, promote democratic governance and protect the country from foreign ambitions.

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